Teachers & Social Media in the BC Context

In the current public education climate in British Columbia the use of technology is being encouraged in order to engage individual learners and enhance their educational experiences (BC Ed Plan, 2011). This promotion and use of technology in today's classrooms simply makes sense in order to educate and prepare students for their future careers in what is shaping up to be a workforce dependent on technology. Social media has a large part to play in this future as it already shapes the way that we, as a society, connect, communicate and collaborate online. In order to meet the needs of our 21st Century learners we, as teachers, will be required to provide students with the tools, knowledge and problem solving skills that will enable them to interact effectively online in a safe, responsible and ethical way (BC Ed Plan, 2011). Though issues of privacy, safety and bullying are not new in schools, due to the advent of social media use in (and out of) the classroom and the permanence of and easy accessibility to information posted online, we will have to expand our horizons and alter the way that we teach using technology.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) states that:

> The main risk to preadolescents and adolescents online today are risks from each other, risks of improper use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much information, or posting false information about themselves or others.

As teachers we must take the lead in instructing today's youth about both the potential dangers and the educational benefits of social media and it is imperative that in doing so we provide our students with a solid foundation of skills and understandings that allow them to effectively incorporate the use of technology into their everyday lives.

When it comes to the creation of digital footprints, teachers need to ensure that students are acting responsibly and ethically online from a very early age. This is not an easy task as anyone who has ever taught or raised a teenager can attest to. Teenagers tend to be very emotional, selfish and live in the moment. In times of crisis they can be rash and quick to react in a manner that most will come to regret later. In times past, this common, yet unacceptable, response might present itself in the form of a nasty note, harsh words from across the hall or even perhaps escalate to a fight after school in order to resolve differences of opinions. In this day and age where 75% of teenagers have a cell phone (as cited in American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011) and most have a savvy understanding of how to use social media in order to share information quickly, rebuttals often take the form of hurtful or damaging texts,

defamation campaigns on social media sites or sending out embarrassing pictures or information to a wide audience. The problem with these online rants is that once the dust has settled and friends have either made up or gone their separate ways, the texts, posts, compromising pictures or reputation damaging information is still out there, accessible by the world and often already seen by the majority of people in the surrounding area or school. This makes it difficult for both parties (but particularly the victimized individual) to get past the issue as there is a constant reminder of the altercation online that everyone around them has at the very least been made aware of and more likely has evidence to boot.

This type of dangerous behaviour is also present where students openly share information with people they meet online. The case of Amanda Todd (Wikipedia, 2013) comes to mind where an initial, seemingly innocent 'flash' on camera turned tragic when pictures of her nude were then distributed to students at various schools that she subsequently attended leading to her isolation, depression and eventual suicide. Snapchat, a popular new social media app, allows users to "Snap an ugly selfie or a video, add a caption, and send it to a friend (or maybe a few). They'll receive it, laugh, and then the snap disappears." (Snapchat, 2013). Many students will argue the merits of Snapchat over video messaging (as was the case with Todd), claiming that the pictures aren't permanent and therefore if you send an inappropriate picture or message it's instantly viewed by the person (or people) receiving it and then it becomes inaccessible. Unfortunately they fail to see two major problems with this reasoning, 1) that in order for the images to be posted they must be stored somewhere and are therefore potentially accessible (though granted the process might not be easy), and 2) by simply taking a screenshot of the picture (as was also the case with Todd), those who receive a Snapchat can still easily save, share and distribute the picture to anyone they choose. Though Snapchat advises that "The sender will be notified if we detect you have taken a screenshot" (Snapchat, 2013), this attempt to discourage the practice could prove to be 'too little, too late' in terms of containing the spread of a potentially embarrassing or inappropriate image.

It is also important to remember that the sharing of information or pictures online has many other potential dangers. "Preadolescents and adolescents who lack an awareness of privacy issues often post inappropriate messages, pictures, and videos without understanding that "what goes online stays online." As a result, future jobs and college acceptance may be put into jeopardy by inexperienced and rash clicks of the mouse" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011). A recent study determined that 91% of responding companies "used social media as a way to screen prospective hires." (as referenced in Hengstler, 2012). In a situation where two equally qualified and well interviewed candidates are vying

for a position, social media profiles (and potentially damning pictures or posts contained therein) could be the deciding factor in who gets the position. Though this is a practice that is becoming more and more acceptable, young adults are not typically thinking of future job interviews or getting into their favourite college when they are posting pictures of the party they attended on the weekend or making nasty comments about an ex after a breakup. Inappropriate posts could also be a huge source of trouble for students where tech savvy parents or teachers choose to track their children/student's activities online.

What we truly need to emphasize to our students is that what is posted online is permanent. In some form or other it is traceable, findable and usable. Be it a picture from years ago, an off the cuff remark to a friend that could be taken out of context or an unintended post by another party on a timeline, information that can be damaging to your reputation can likely be found after the fact and could potentially be used against you. Indeed, "if you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" (Schmidt, 2009 as cited in Hengstler, 2013). One might add that if you are going to do it anyways, maybe you shouldn't be posting evidence of it anywhere online.

However, keeping all of the potential dangers in mind, social media itself should not be seen as the problem. In his blog post '10 reasons we need social media in education,' Justin Tarte reminds us to "remember, tools don't make bad decisions; the people using those tools inappropriately do" (Tarte, 2013). He then goes on to outline the virtues of social media use in the classroom. "Social media helps move students from simply consuming information to creating and then sharing their work with the world" (Tarte, 2013). As teachers trying to reach 21st Century students, social media allows us to make connections with them and with others around the world to help enhance not only our own teaching practices, but also our student's abilities to access the information they need and think critically about the sources of information they are depending on. It allows our students to collaborate with others to develop shared knowledge and then to provide evidence of that knowledge in the form of wiki's, blogs and ePortfolios. And further, it allows them to communicate with each other during the creation of their knowledge, developing important social literacies in the process.

Tarte also notes that "Social media will help you meet your students, their parents, and your community where they already are" (Tarte, 2013). The reality here is that many of our students and their parents are already members of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter or Pinterest. They are already competent users of these platforms and often would rather communicate online through them than

meet face to face or talk on the phone. By approaching them 'online' we are opening additional lines of communication and allowing parents and students to develop relationships with us on their terms that feel both easy and comfortable. Tarte finishes his blog by surmising:

> If you say you are preparing students to be successful in the future regardless of the path they choose, *you have to include digital citizenship and digital branding into your curricula*. The banning and blocking of social media because students will misuse it in the educational setting is pretty hypocritical. Most school districts have a website, a Facebook page, and perhaps even a Twitter account. If the district sees value in utilizing these social media platforms, then why would that same district block them and not take advantage of that wonderful opportunity and potential with the students...? (Tarte, 2013)

Used effectively, social media can allow us to communicate, share information, create knowledge together and connect with other people – be it in our community or around the world – in order to broaden our understandings of the world in which we live. The potential of social media use in the classroom is truly astounding.

The concerns, however, remain in ensuring that our students are using social media appropriately while in our care. In order to do this we need to have a certain amount of transparency and ensure that we, as teachers, make parents and other stakeholders aware of how we are making use of social media in the classroom and why. We also have to ensure that we are using social media in an appropriate manner ourselves at all times and that we take advantage of 'teachable moments' found in the classroom or in the world to ensure that our students are aware of what both responsible and irresponsible social media use looks like. "Teachers and parents have an essential role to play in helping young people develop their own moral compasses to guide their online behaviour." (Media Smarts, n.d.)

There seems to be a definite lack of consistency when it comes to outlining policies and procedures to deal with social media use in the classroom. Though many districts have proposed 'acceptable use policies', it has been pointed out that:

> The likelihood that a school media waiver meets the key criteria set down in our BC law and regulations for 'knowledge', 'notice', and 'informed consent' with regard to these types of activities in these technological environments is slim. (Hengstler, 2013)

As stated in an earlier reflection, "This leaves us – as teachers, administrators and school districts – wide open to legal challenge and, even more importantly, should leave us very concerned about the safety and security of our students when they are online." (Sward, 2013)

As teachers it is our responsibility to ensure the safety of our students. In this respect we cannot allow our fears in regards to social media to control us and stop us from using it, but rather those fears coupled with our knowledge and experience should guide us into making good decisions when faced with new and unknown situations. Already held to a higher standard, we are used to being a role model for acceptable behaviour and this delving into the online realm will be no different. Just as teachers have always led the way in modeling appropriate behaviour in their schools and communities, it continues to be "critical to support the development of personally, socially and morally responsible cybercitizens who can manage their own digital identities" (Hengstler, 2011). It is further imperative that we not adopt a 'technopanic mentality' which could "lead to technology bans without a substantive or rigorous analysis of the risks & benefits associated with a technology, accompanied by an assessment of --and experience with --how those risks can be effectively handled" (Hengstler, 2013).

Instead, it is important that we instill precautionary attitudes in our students online practice so that they are aware what sorts of information it is okay to use online (usernames, general information and things they like) and what information they need to protect in order to maintain their own safety (name, age/birthdate, gender, address, phone number). In their Cyberbullying Backgrounder, Media Smarts (n.d.) outlines student's "own responsibilities as 'Netizens' in building and contributing to positive online communities," identifying a list of rules to help "students develop a code for ethical conduct online, to encourage positive online interactions, and to help them respond proactively if they find themselves targeted by a cyberbully." This list includes valuable suggestions to students, from obtaining permission to provide information about others before spreading gossip online to not writing anything about another person online that you wouldn't actually say to them in person. They also provide valuable tips on what students should do if they, themselves, become the victim of online attacks.

As educators who encourage social media use in the classroom, we can't exactly stay the course as we find ourselves in these new and uncharted waters. But it remains our duty to ensure that our students are prepared for the world and workforce that awaits them. In order to do so, it will require them to be exposed to these new social media tools in such a manner that they can develop the understandings and knowledge that will enable them to make use of the online environment in a safe, responsible and ethical way (BC Ed Plan, 2011).

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